

On Suffering and Being “A Normal Refugee”

Asma and Taylor

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A: I always go back to myself and say, “Yeah, [Asma], you are normal for refugee kids.”

T: Yeah.

A: “You are, you are normal for immigrant kids. You’re never raped. You’re never have shot. Nobody abused you.”

Asma and I were just wrapping up a conversation when she mentioned the word “normal.” In fact, I had already turned off my recorder, but I yanked it back out of the pencil case I had once used to hold my nice swim goggles in high school as she continued:

T: Yeah?

A: Um... “I mean your story’s normal. Don’t be sad for nothing missing your family only.” But when I see myself again, I say, “Okay, my story’s not very bad, but, but still... I am a—lost girl who was immigrant, and lost her father, too, for, for, for no reason. I lost my father for no reason, he didn’t do anything for no one.” And I say, “Is matter. Your stories matter.” I tell myself, “My stories matter.”

In the last episode, I discussed “the refugee experience” and how Asma’s story complicates that. This recording takes another look at that idea, but I wanted Asma’s own evaluation of her story’s worth to stand on its own. Being a refugee is an integral part of Asma’s experience and identity, and that insecurity about her “normality” as a refugee points to this need to perform one’s suffering.

Kristin Langellier speaks to this performance of suffering when she writes:

Refugees, such as the Somalis, are not only expected to harbor harrowing tales of trauma and escape along an arduous route to their destination in the United States and Maine, but they may also be asked to tell and retell these ‘tales of plight and flight’ to classroom peers or other audiences. (2010: 70)

It is almost as though refugee-ness is synonymous with drama and trauma, and Asma’s identification as a “normal refugee” speaks to a kind of devaluing of her experience in relation to the cultural expectations we have about what it means to be a refugee. However, the second part of that recording speaks to another of Langellier’s conclusions, in which the retelling of one’s story is “a dialogic, co-constructed, and transnational encounter in which the narrator reads and talks back to regulating discourses at the same time that I [as anthropologist] question my own complicity in dominant designs” (66).

In the statement you heard earlier, Asma *does* “read” and respond to that expectation for a refugee narrative, and I think that her conclusion empowers her in spite of the insecurity it creates. Selfishly, I would like to hope that my own curiosity about and commitment to hearing her story is what helped her find the value in what she deems a “normal” life as a refugee. One such attempt for me to make that clear happens within the conversation I referenced earlier:

T: It does.

A: Yeah.

T: It really matters.

A: Yeah.

T: Because...I think when people imagine a refugee, they only imagine what you see on the news. They only see the—you know, they only see the big bad stories that you've seen.

A: Yeah.

T: And I think sometimes, that doesn't feel real.

A: Yeah.

T: You know, like sometimes, that's so horrible that I couldn't understand it. Even your story, there are parts of your story that I don't think I could ever really understand them. Because I didn't experience them.

A: Yeah.

T: You know, I didn't grow up the way you grew up.

A: Yeah.

T: Um. But your story, I think, is all the more valuable because...

A: Yeah.

T: It is someone who has—who tried to live a normal life. And it was normal, but it was not normal.

A: It was not normal, yeah. It's a normal, normal brain, normal healthy person, but the lifestyle was not normal.

T: Yeah. And you—

A: Yeah. The lifestyle was not normal.

T: —Your story?

A: Yeah.

T: The-the story doesn't have to be super dramatic.

A: Yeah.

T: It doesn't have to be... full of action. It-it-it...

A: Yeah.

T: It is full of a real life, of a real, actual life. And it does matter.

To me, it *did* matter. That was—and continues to be—my main source of inspiration for this project. Asma’s story, in its intricacy and surprising “normality” in comparison to our typical idea of a refugee’s experience, speaks to a generalization that I am confident in making. It shows that she is a human being. That all refugees are human beings. And while that seems like a too-simple truth, it is one that is often lost in representations of refugees.

Heath Cabot writes about how “representational practices of ethnography and advocacy alike are haunted by various ‘ghosts’: traces of silenced subjects who index both the limits and possibilities of representation” (2016: 645). Asma and I both have our own ghosts. Late at night, when the violence and uncertainty of Somalia makes her “head warm” and her “feet cold,” Asma yearns for answers from the dead, who she believes are the only ones who understand the chaos of Somalia and know how to fix it.

I, too, have ghosts: the writers and subjects of past ethnographies who have silenced the narratives they are seeking to share. But I am lucky—my ghosts left books and articles behind, ones that warn me of the danger of this silencing and ask for my awareness as I endeavor to share and understand the voices of otherized people. And so, as Asma and I work together to make sure the ghosts inherent in this project are few and far between, I hope that she can find strength in the living story *she* shares.